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[rh]Laughing when you shouldn't

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[ti]Laughing when you shouldn't:

Being "good" among the Batek of Peninsular Malaysia

[ab]Batek people describe their many laughter taboos with utmost seriousness, and in ethical terms of good and bad. Despite this, people often get it wrong—sometimes laughing all the more when the taboos forbid it. Because laughter can be ambiguous and impossible to control, being wrong can be accepted without the need for discussion or reflection. People thus act autonomously while holding deeply shared ethical orientations. Here, ethics can be both culturally predefined and shaped by individuals, as when it comes to laughter people draw on individual and shared concerns in an ad hoc, flexible manner. Laughter's tangled contradictions thus demonstrate that people's understandings of being "good" are mutually implicated with their understandings of what it means to be a person in relation to others.

[laughter, egalitarianism, taboo, ethics, hunter-gatherers, Batek, Malaysia, Southeast Asia]

[ab]Kaum Batek begitu serius apabila menerangkan tentang kebanyakan pantang larang mereka mengenai ketawa, dan buruk baiknya dari segi etika.

Walau bagaimanapun, ramai orang masih keliru—kadang-kadang mereka lebih banyak ketawa padahal ini dilarang menurut pantang larang. Oleh kerana ketawa adalah sesuatu yang mempunyai banyak makna dan sukar ditafsirkan dan tidak mungkin dikawal, 'kesalahan' ini boleh diterima tanpa perlu dibincangkan atau dipertimbangkan. Oleh kerana itu, orang bertindak bersendirian pada masa yang sama memegang nilai etika yang dikongsi bersama. Di sini, etika boleh ditakrifkan terlebih dahulu menurut budaya ataupun dibentuk oleh individu, kerana dengan ketawa, orang memahaminya dari kepentingan individu atau bersama mengikut keadaan tertentu dan cara yang fleksibel. Percanggahan dalam erti ketawa menunjukkan pemahaman seseorang itu untuk menjadi baik saling menunjukkan pemahaman mereka mengenai apa ertinya seseorang itu dalam hubungan dengan orang lain. [*ketawa, egalitarianisme, pantang larang, etika, pemburu-pemungut, Batek, Malaysia, Asia Tenggara*]

[dc]Na? Srimjam and I once stayed up late drinking tea while everyone else was asleep.¹ As we chatted, a frog started to croak. This particular frog's call sounds uncannily like someone breaking wind, and the sound therefore caused us to break into uncontrollable, foolish laughter. But it is taboo to laugh at this type of frog because it is a *lawac* animal, part of a set of taboos that includes among its consequences the risk of angering the thunder being Gubar, meaning that laughing at it could cause a storm. Every time we

laughed, she would therefore anxiously hush and chide that we risked being *lawac*. As she did so, she would just about get her laughter under control, straighten her face, and then burst into peals of laughter once more as soon as the frog called again. This went on countless times until she was weeping weakly in hilarity. In the morning, she recounted this story to her mother and sisters, who also responded by chuckling.

For Batek people, laughter is pleasurable yet subject to taboo, and in the wrong situations it can have catastrophic consequences. Given the potential danger of laughter, people often talk about knowing *when* and *how* to laugh as an important indicator of a person's ability to act ethically, or in their words, to act in a *bt?et* (Batek: good, right, beautiful) way rather than in a *jbec* (Batek: bad, wrong, ugly) one.² As Na? Srimjam showed, however, knowing that it is taboo to laugh doesn't always mean the laughter stops, since knowing that the laughter is forbidden can make something even funnier—and the laughter impossible to control. While taking the taboos and their consequences extremely seriously, and having a deeply shared, explicitly articulated, understanding of what is *bt?et* and *jbec*, people may also decide to ignore the taboos, they may make mistakes, or they may spontaneously throw caution to the wind.

Laughter itself is thus inherently conflicting: it can be at once dangerous, tabooed, subversive, permitted, joyful, pleasurable, and impossible to control. How, therefore, might managing the conflicting

demands of laughter shape people's broader ideas of the "good"? What might this tell one about the nature of ethical beliefs themselves? Because laughter can be uncontrollable, and because people can thus easily get it wrong, it is an ideal vehicle with which to explore how people shape their everyday ethical dilemmas into a shared orientation toward what it means to be a "good" person.

The Batek are one of at least 19 ethnolinguistic groups of Orang Asli (Malay: Original People) of Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand (Endicott 2016, 1).³ The most recent estimate puts their population at over 1,500 across the Malaysian states of Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan (Endicott 2016 et al., 100). They are lowland rain forest dwellers who move between living locations in and around Taman Negara (Malay: National Park). They center their daily activities around hunting and gathering, trade, day laboring (inside the forest and on palm oil plantations), and tourism work. Among themselves they speak Batek, a language of the Northern Aslian branch of the Austroasiatic family, and most also speak Malay fluently, though there is a slight tendency that some younger men may be more fluent than some older women.⁴

Batek people have many forms of interaction with Malaysians and foreigners, or "outsiders," to whom they refer using the blanket term *gɔp*. They use this term to refer to all non-Batek outsiders (perhaps specified as "white *gɔp*," "Christian *gɔp*," or "Chinese *gɔp*"), but it is also used specifically

to identify Malays (“real *gɔp*”) from other non-Batek people and to invoke Islam. They describe Batek who convert to Islam as “becoming *gɔp*.”

Interactions with *gɔp* often result from participation in trade and tourism (Endicott 2016 et al.). Consequently, some Batek people spend a lot of time around *gɔp*, others don’t. But even for those who choose not to regularly interact with *gɔp*, *gɔp*’s presence is all around in Batek homes.⁵ This could be in the form of Malay foodstuffs, the sounds of Malay and Indonesian pop music played on mobile phones, the use of Malay loanwords, or even the prevalent diseases that people associate as originating with *gɔp*, such as tuberculosis. In some Batek areas, the sound of the call to prayer can be heard drifting over the treetops.

Despite this, Batek people also regularly use ethical terms to contrast the behavior of *gɔp* with their own behavior (Lye 2005, 67-68), as is the case in other ethnographic contexts (Basso 1984; Kricheff and Lukas 2015). Even Malay loanwords are pronounced in distinctively Batek ways, and people were keen to correct me if I accidentally used the *gɔp* ways of pronouncing them when speaking Batek. People distinguish forest foods from *gɔp* foods, and forest medicines from *gɔp* medicines. Indeed, there are often taboos that prohibit the mixing of substances that originate in what are kept as two separate realms. These apply even when Batek people live (as many now do) on the forest fringes, among palm oil and rubber plantations. Ways of laughing are no exception to this sought-after ethical separation

between Batek and *gɔp*. The separation is both clearly demarcated (Dentan 1975; Kricheff and Lukas 2015) and ambiguous, given that people at once enjoy and denounce many *gɔp* things.⁶

Though Batek people do not articulate an abstract category of “ethics,” attention to the ethical pervades everyday discourses and actions (Endicott and Endicott 2008, 43), framed in terms of what is *btʔɛt* and its opposite, *jbec*. These terms are used in everyday situations to refer to things that, to Batek people, deserve them. Judgments of *btʔɛt* may apply to the smell of certain flowers, the taste of fruits or other delicious foods, the sensation of cool, clear water on the skin, the sight of vines hanging down from an old tree into the river, a person who shares a lot, a rain-tight home, a tightly woven sleeping mat, properly tidied-away things (such as hair decorations), doing something right so as to adhere to the taboos, the sound of certain cicadas, and walking carefully in the forest by avoiding tripping or getting caught on thorns (unlike *gɔp*, who they say don’t know how to walk properly in the forest). *Jbec* may apply to bad smells, sounds, or tastes, things done halfheartedly or wrongly, or a “bad” or “mad” person. These are all styles of behaving that the Batek regularly and explicitly describe as being not only *btʔɛt* but also “Batek.”

Furthermore, men who worked as tour guides told of tourists laughing around leeches and insects on night hikes, or generally being too noisy in the forest and hence causing storms. These, like Naʔ Srimjam’s laughter at

the frog, are *lawac* actions. Practices surrounding laughter are part of this broader range of behavioral and communicative subtleties that are seen as distinctively Batek. Particular ways of laughing are therefore signs of an ethical, *btʔɛt*, and Batek person, signs that can be seen as a kind of communicative “key” (Hymes 1974, 57–58). Batek people use the “key” implied by certain ways of laughing to indicate how “good” a person is, which is often contrasted to the immoral or ignorant behavior of outsiders.

Batek people might also contrast *gɔp* with themselves in other ways: they often talk about how *gɔp* “don’t share” their food, belongings, and money, and about how they prefer to move camps often, so that *gɔp* can’t tell them what to do. Batek people thus ground both their ethnicity and their ethical orientations toward egalitarianism in their everyday practices (Endicott and Endicott 2008).⁷ When outsiders’ behavior demonstrates an ethical orientation that opposes Batek values, it can further reinforce these distinctions, both in terms of how people laugh and of who is said to behave in the “right” (*btʔɛt*) way.

As was demonstrated when Naʔ Srimjam laughed at the frog, however, behaving in the “right” and “Batek” way does not necessarily mean always adhering to the taboos. Indeed, on that occasion, no aspersions were cast on her “Batekness,” despite her *lawac* action. She was not considered to have become *gɔp*, nor were her actions considered *jbec*. How, then, does a group of people negotiate these taboos with the kind of autonomy that Naʔ

Srimjam demonstrated, without feeling as though they are undermining a shared, preexisting ethical system that is distinctly “Batek”?

When people laugh when they shouldn’t, the picture that emerges of how they seek “to create the good in their lives” (Robbins 2013, 457) calls into question the artificial assumption of ethics as either an imposed set of social obligations followed by unthinking individuals (Laidlaw 2014), or as something shaped by individuals in a process of reflective self-fashioning (Scheele 2015, 35; see also Keane 2016, 20, for a summary of this debate). Instead, ethics are best considered kinds of “orientations” that are formed through an ad hoc patchwork of motivations and justifications. These orientations move continually between individual and shared concerns, and they are implicated in and shaped by how people conceive of themselves in relation to others.

[\[h1\]Ethical orientations as lived experience](#)

[ni]As Na? Srimjam demonstrated that night with the frog, people sometimes do laugh when, according to the taboos, they shouldn’t, and in some instances they are not viewed as behaving unethically for doing so. Yet this doesn’t mean that people don’t take the taboos seriously: it would be reductive to downplay the importance and centrality of these taboos, which are a highly salient set of beliefs and values that existed long before the individuals with whom I conducted fieldwork. Ethical concepts, therefore,

cannot be seen only as mechanisms of social control (Laidlaw 2014, 16–17), since people like Na? Srimjam sometimes seem quite ready to act outside the behaviors that ideas of right and wrong recommend. At the same time, people’s broader cultural imaginings can’t be relegated to the background (Scheele 2015, 35). Indeed, though she acted with ethical autonomy in breaking the taboo, in that instance what made Na? Srimjam’s tabooed laughter so enjoyable were her own cultural imaginings (alongside the fact that the sound of the frog was funny in itself!). “Categories” can thus “precede actors,” and when one considers ethics, one cannot dismiss local imaginings of collectives in favor of a sole focus on the individual, and vice versa (Scheele 2015, 35).

This tension between individual autonomy and shared cultural imaginings is reflected in debates on the nature of ethics itself. I use the term *ethics* over *morality*, because these terms are largely interchangeable (Fassin 2012, 6; Laidlaw 2014, 4; Lambek 2010a; Mattingly 2014, 474; Mattingly and Throop 2018). The two terms have, however, sometimes been mobilized for different purposes, reflecting one of the major debates in the area: Do *morals*, as types of rules, determine what people are obligated to do (Durkheim 1953, 59–60)? Or are *ethics* subjective, produced by “agents” in “accordance with their inquiry about what a good life is” (Fassin 2012, 6–8)?⁸

This strong difference in positions sets out an unhelpful dichotomy, which can be expressed as the following question: Do we have the freedom to define what we think of as good and to act accordingly, or are our ideas of the good imposed on us by cultural obligations, which in turn define how we act? Among the Batek, this amounts to the question: Do people have the freedom to define their own ideas of the “good,” or are their ethical orientations imposed on them by the taboo complexes (adherence to which is considered ethical)? More specifically with regard to laughter, do people decide for themselves when and how to laugh, or do they laugh only in accordance with the ideals the taboos lay out?

When people laugh when they shouldn't, it demonstrates the artificiality of such a dichotomy (Keane 2016, 20). These moments demonstrate that people shape their ethical orientations in the constant motion between individual and collective concerns at any given moment. Though debates surrounding freedom in the shaping of ethics are thus as messy as human ethical puzzles themselves, how people handle the messiness of their lived experiences—in particular their unpredictable, contagious laughter—is key to how they form shared ethical orientations. These are based not on social control but on a shifting, flexible understanding of what it means to be a person in relation to others.

Some (though not all) Batek people can move seamlessly between interacting with *gop* in Malay, perhaps using their mannerisms and

references, and moments later denouncing these behaviors as “unethical,” or *jbec*. Almost all people carefully modify their actions most of the time so as to take into account the preferences of Gubar and the nonhuman persons, such as fruits and flowers, considering these varied persons as others in relation to them (Rudge 2017, forthcoming; see also Lye 2005, 117–19). Personhood is made through relatedness—every person being made up of the relations they build with others (Bird-David 1999). Persons are “social microcosms,” containing a plurality within themselves (Strathern 1990, 13).

Movement between persons and collectives constitutes social life (Strathern 1990, 14; cf. Jackson 2017, xvi), which is thus an “ad hoc plurality” (Bird-David 2005, 214) of related individuals, a diverse “many” who work “separately together” (Bird-David 2017, 14–15, 129). People’s concerns over what constitutes being ethically “Batek” does not imply that they seek an “undifferentiated unity of consciousness” (Stasch 2009, 1; on “Western” perceptions of Korowai, see Bird-David 2017, 17; Stasch 2009), or that they undergo “de-pluralization” (Strathern 1990, 13) in their shared understanding of themselves as Batek. When they consider “Batekness,” the ways people laugh (and try not to) demonstrate that people are quite concerned with how to allow for individuality *within* the ways that they seek to cooperate, as related yet separate persons, in shared ethical projects. Among the Batek of Kelantan State, this dynamic has been referred to as “cooperative autonomy” (Endicott 2011, 2008).

It is necessary, therefore, to understand people as constantly moving between an ad hoc patchwork of motivations and justifications in their everyday ethical lives (Briggs 1998, 2). Reflecting this, I use the term *ethical orientation*, because *ethics* might risk implying that ethical behavior is fixed. Batek people orient themselves toward what they see as *btʔɛt*, using whichever is appropriate in that moment—perhaps acting in a way that is defined as *btʔɛt*—and perhaps making mistakes, acting spontaneously, or ignoring these ideals completely.

[h1]Dangerous laughter and its consequences

[ni]Reflecting this, the Batek's taboos, while largely consistent, may also seem idiosyncratic. There may be slight variations between people, between extended networks of families and friends, or between areas of the forest (Endicott 1979, 30). From reading earlier ethnographies of other Semang groups (Schebesta 1928; Skeat and Blagden 1906; Needham 1967), one can get the sense that the taboos, including those on laughter, are conceived of as strict "rules." These rules are analyzed for their symbolic properties, with little attention to the lived experiences of the people who practice them.

One might thus get the sense that taboos are *only* fear-causing rules or obligations (Tacey 2013, 246–47), as if "moral facts" constituted "moral authority," which individuals are in "no position to question" (Durkheim

1953, 56–60; see also Howell 1981, 2012). Pushing to make the taboos seem systematic and structural, scholars have exaggerated the extent to which they are rule bound, and overlooked part of the role they play in Batek ethical life. This is not to say there isn't some systematicity: while allowing for a level of idiosyncrasy, the broad shape of Batek taboos and cosmological beliefs have indeed remained similar in overall shape across generations and locations (Endicott 1979) while adapting to relevant local and global events (Lye 2005; Tacey 2013). In the case of the laughter taboos, however, they are not always applied as strictly as might be inferred.

This goes for the specific case of the laughter taboos. One person might give one answer on one day regarding a particular detail of the taboos, and in a new encounter have a slightly different opinion or piece of information. During fieldwork, if I was to ask people why someone had said something different from what they had told me, or why they had told me something different before, the answer would often be "It just is" (*blap blap leh*), or "I don't know, him or her on their own" (*?acoh ?o? bla?*). The answer would almost always apply when asking about why sometimes consequences for taboo laughter were suffered and sometimes nothing seemed to happen, even when someone had done something wrong—"it just is."

Despite this level of idiosyncrasy, there are some fundamental tenets that individuals and groups *do* consistently describe, in ways that resemble

how early anthropologists described taboos among other Semang groups (Schebesta 1928; Skeat and Blagden 1906), and that are widely present in the region even beyond other Orang Asli groups (Benjamin 2013, 454). Neither these idiosyncrasies nor consistencies should be ignored. It is precisely this conflict that makes evident how people seek to simultaneously foreground separateness and togetherness in how they orient themselves toward an idea of “the good.”

All laughter is potentially taboo if it is loud or goes on for too long, because it is *lawac* and risks causing a storm. Some laughter is particularly tabooed. Thus, all laughter is taboo, but some instances of it are more taboo than others. The main consequence of the taboos termed *lawac* is the risk of upsetting Gubar, who is sensitive to laughter at certain things, laughter that is too raucous, particular kinds of mockery, loud sounds, and the mixing of incompatible smells or bodies. In response, he gets angry and stomps around, causing a storm. In the forest, people fear storms greatly, since strong winds can cause trees to fall, which can be fatal. Things that are *lawac* to laugh at include certain *lawac* animals, such as the clouded monitor lizard and white-handed gibbon. Particular invertebrates are also considered extremely *lawac*, the primary example being the leech, which is often simply referred to as “the bad one.” Indeed, a common explanation for storms would be along the lines of “Perhaps we were close to leeches when we laughed in the forest earlier.”

It is also taboo to laugh at or mock things for other reasons. For example, to laugh at things such as fruits, flowers, bees, or honey, which are considered *tahun* (Batek: “of the fruit season,” from the Malay word for “year”; Lye 2005, 60), is widely said to risk madness (Rudge 2017, 162). The extreme symptoms of this might be a head that swells to gigantic proportions, trying to eat fire, caterpillars coming out of one’s eyes, and being unable to speak, such that “even your parents wouldn’t recognize you,” as one older Batek woman warned me in regard to a particular kind of fruit. By extension, singing shaman songs, which have an important relationship to the fruit season (Endicott 1979, 55–61), also risks madness if one doesn’t sing properly and beautifully, or if one jokes about them or laughs a lot while singing them.

These ideals are reflected in other practices surrounding fruits, flowers, and honey, such as not stepping over them, not leaving them lying around on the floor, and not throwing them about. As well as risking danger to the laughers, uproarious behavior around fruits, flowers, or honey may also risk making them feel shy, ashamed, or embarrassed (*yũp*), and therefore cause them not to appear, bloom, or ripen that year, as might defecating or talking about defecating close to fruit trees. Laughing a lot at another person (unless that person was deemed “mad”) would also be thought of as *jbec* behavior, for the same reason that it would make that person shy, embarrassed, or ashamed. Laughing at anything that you are

eating is also dangerous, especially animals, since it can cause diarrhea or stomach cramps. This is exemplified by a story from the “old times,” in which two shamans went hunting and caught a bear, and as they were cooking it, they mocked the bear’s hands, laughing and saying it looked “just like a human hand.” The shamans were then afflicted with so much diarrhea that they died.

[h1]Learning to laugh

[ni]These taboos surrounding laughter can be understood as ways of “marking” (Valeri 2000, 46) particular things or ways of behaving that are considered *btʔet*. In this case, “good” behaviors concern respecting forest foods, especially fruits and flowers, and therefore respecting, by *not* laughing at, the nonhuman persons with whom the Batek share the forest. At the same time, the taboos mark out those things or behaviors that are *jbec* by outlining potential danger. Learning to control one’s laughter and mockery in relation to what shouldn’t be mocked is thus a kind of ethical skill, whereby one learns how to live in a “good” way that foregrounds the relatedness of Batek people and the nonhuman persons of the forest.

If this were the end of the story, however, there would be little room for flexibility, disagreement, or getting things wrong. Instead, while allowing for some difference in how individuals treat the taboos in general, the laughter taboos tend to be the most commonly and obviously broken, even

though all kinds of taboos may occasionally be either accidentally broken or surreptitiously ignored. Because it is *laughter* that is the subject of taboo in this case, the autonomy of individual persons is built into the very idea of cooperating in the shared ethical project of “Batekness.” This is for two reasons. First, laughter can happen at any time, no matter what people are doing. It is not restricted to any one domain of activity, and people’s control of their laughter is obvious to everyone nearby. Almost any situation can therefore become one in which people learn a shared understanding of the “right” and “good” ways to control their laughter.

Second, given that laughter is ever present, children learn how they are supposed to laugh by copying their elders’ and peers’ behavior, through imitation and curiosity, in what is termed a “learner-motivated pedagogic practice” in relation to taboos among Mbendjele hunter-gatherers in Congo-Brazzaville (Lewis 2008, 297). Laughter taboos thus provide a means of people’s ethical enskillment *through* everyday practices. This is a manner of “teaching” values that does not require deference to a single authority figure or to a single set of rules (Lewis 2008, 305). Knowledge of the taboos is diffuse.⁹ Though everyone is familiar with them, some people may have particular personal knowledge. They may have laughed when eating a certain food and fallen sick, or perhaps they laughed in a particular situation that ended up having other dangerous or unpleasant ramifications.

I was also taught the taboos by Batek people in this kind of ad hoc manner, reminiscent of how children learn the taboos: for example, when about to go looking for freshwater mussels, I was warned, "Don't laugh around them. They are *lawac*." Similarly, when I first ate monitor lizard, I was reminded not to bathe in the river to avoid the taboo of mixing its blood with the river, and when I first had my hair decorated with cosmologically important fragrant leaves and flowers, I was warned not to say their names too much or to leave them lying around carelessly. When I got things wrong, anyone around would tell me immediately, even children.

Knowledge of the taboos, or responsibility for teaching them is thus not held by any one particular person or group of people. As with cosmological knowledge more broadly, knowledge of the taboos is described in "bits and pieces, which is also the form in which they learn about it" (Endicott 1979, 30). The laughter taboos are thus a form of pedagogy that is a distinctively egalitarian version of Michel Foucault's (2000, 287) argument that ethical "care of the self" requires "listening to the lessons of a master." Because of how the taboos are learned and shared, there is here no discernible "master."

Batek people thus ensure that not only do people learn through the content of the taboos, or *what* one can and can't laugh at, but they also learn from the process itself. Learning *how* to learn, how to participate in these complex taboos autonomously and without enforcing one's authority

on others, is itself a process of ethical enskillment embedded in daily activities.

Just as knowledge of the taboos is dispersed, the consequences of violating them are not enforced by any one person. Although the consequences of breaking a *lawac* taboo may have a negative impact on everyone, the responsibility for arbitrating the taboos is outside the human realm, since it is Gubar who reacts to the wrongdoing. In the case of the *lawac* taboos, the potential for direct criticism by other Batek people for having “caused” Gubar to be upset by breaking the *lawac* taboos is further removed, because it is often difficult to know who upset Gubar. It may have been someone in another camp, it may have even been a Malay person or outsider, or it may have been something that happened a few days before. Sometimes, people do *lawac* things and get away with it, and other times there has been no *lawac* action, and yet there is a storm.

Though people may sometimes have their suspicions and articulate them (usually by gossiping), it would be extremely rare to directly accuse someone of having caused a storm to their face, and unheard of that someone would attempt to mete out anything resembling punishment (Endicott and Endicott 2008, 43). Sometimes, people say, things “just happen,” and only “them on their own” know why.

[\[h1\]Getting it wrong: Uncontrollable laughter](#)

[ni]Laughter can be counterintuitive, as Na? Srimjam made evident when she laughed at the frog all the more because she knew she shouldn't. Though she was aware of the danger of laughing at the frog—she *just couldn't help herself*. Laughter can thus be uncontrollable, compulsive, and highly contagious. It may sometimes be voluntary, but it also sometimes erupts spontaneously. If sometimes one *can't* control one's own laughter, even when this belies one's better ethical judgments, how might this very contradiction shape ideas of right and wrong? It is the multifaceted, unpredictable aspects of laughter that mean it can be used in the shaping of people's ethical orientations.

Na? Srimjam demonstrated this on a further occasion. Her sons had come back with a monitor lizard that afternoon. Many people in the camp wouldn't eat it because it had come from the palm oil plantation rather than the forest—prompting people to say that it was disgusting, since it had probably lived on the feces of rats and pigs. Na? Srimjam was hungry, however, and so was her mother. I sat with her while she scraped off the scales, butchered it, carefully laid out the portions on a banana leaf, and skewered the liver on a stick to smoke over the fire. As we sat, her sister, Na? Badək called from the bottom of the camp to warn her that *gəp* had arrived.

The *gəp* in question in this example was a famously “bad” Malay person, who has been known to show up at the camp and harass young

girls. In addition to this, many Batek people fear that *gɔp* will consider them disgusting for eating meat such as monitor lizards, not because it has come from the plantation but because it is *haram* (Arabic/Malay: forbidden by Islamic law), and because of their many past experiences of prejudice. This sentiment of suspicion and fear of ridicule has a long history, with its roots in 19th-century slave raiding by Malays (Endicott 1983; Endicott 2016, 13–29), and it is further compounded by current attempts to force the Batek to convert to Islam or Christianity and to assimilate into Malaysian society (Dentan 1997 et al.), particularly in the area where we were at that time. Though a few Batek people have good relationships with Malays and other outsiders, harm at the hands of *gɔp* can be very real. On the day in question, when *gɔp* arrived, people feared being ridiculed and made to feel ashamed, at the same time as they were worried that they might get sick if the man was rude about their meat or that there might be a storm, since monitor lizards are a *lawac* animal.

On hearing her sister's call, Na? Srimjam hurriedly started hiding the meat away under banana leaves, covered the fire with a sarong, handed me the skewer with the liver telling me to hide it, grabbed her young baby, and sprinted off into the trees, out of sight. I followed her to where she crouched behind some tall ferns, weeping with uncontrollable laughter.

This kind of laughter in response to situations in which *gɔp* are around is very common. Another *gɔp*, this time a Malay tour guide, would often

cause real fear to Batek people when he would turn up drunk to their camps and expose himself to the women. But when he wasn't around (and sometimes, covertly, even when he was around), people (especially the women) would laugh loudly at his awkward gait and mock him with offensive and lewd names.

In a similar vein, people often also treat Gubar irreverently, even though he is the one who causes storms in response to *lawac* tabooed actions in the first place (Endicott 1979, 167; see also Lye 2002, 11; 2005, 155). One afternoon, Na? ?Aliw had absentmindedly broken a *lawac* taboo and cooked noodles on the same fire as fish. That evening, Gubar was not happy. Rain was falling in sheets, his thunderous voice was rumbling, and the wind was howling, making the trees creak and moan ominously. We were roused from sleep, young children were strapped to their parents in case we had to run suddenly from a falling tree, and the men were stoking huge fires to try to prevent the rain (during a storm, Batek people build big fires to make the rain go away). People were obviously afraid, nervously scanning the tree line.

Then, Krdoŋ cut her shin and mixed the blood with water in a jug, and one by one others went up so their shins could also be cut (or sometimes the mixture just wiped on their shin and then put back in the jug). Na? ?Aliw's husband, ?Ey ?Aliw, took the jug from her and threw the mixture up over the roofs of the lean-tos, shouting at Gubar to stop being angry,

pleading with him that they were “good” (*bt?et*) people. Na? ?Aliw joined him, and they shared throwing the mixture around, but every time there was a particularly loud clap of thunder, they would burst out laughing: “Oh, Gubar,” “Ha ha ha, he’s so loud,” “Aaah, Gubar, what is he doing?” Others in the camp laughed as well.

Even though laughter itself can make Gubar angry, it was laughter *at* Gubar that drew him into the same ethical realm, thereby reducing the hold of the fear that he caused. Extending this idea, people even revel in mocking the taboos themselves. Na? Srimjam once mocked the prohibitions surrounding the cutting of pandanus leaves: cutting pandanus after the time the heat starts to go out of the day can make one go “mad,” with an uncontrollably shaking head. On one pandanus-cutting trip, she asked me the time, and when I told her it was already 2:30 p.m., she suddenly very realistically faked shaking her head around, with staring eyes, pretending to be mad, until, after I got over my initial worry and shock, we both burst out laughing, imagining what it would have been like had she really “gone mad.” When we got back to camp, she repeated this story again and again to the others over the next few days, and it was received with hoots of laughter every time.

The ways Batek laugh at *gop*, at Gubar, and at the taboos themselves thus contradicts the idea that egalitarian societies such as the Batek’s are in fact “governed” by their “divinities,” with their “life and death powers” over

the human population (Sahlins 2017, 92). Rather, in a manner more akin to Ceq Wong and Nayaka people (Bird-David 1999; Howell 2017, 144), Batek people socialize *with* Gubar—perhaps through paying attention to his sensory preferences by not laughing or committing other displeasing acts, or perhaps by laughing at him when his actions may threaten them. Though his actions may cause real fear and devastating consequences, he is not considered to be “governing” them.

Similarly, laughing *at* the taboos ensures they do not become proscriptive or dogmatic. Like Gubar, they are something to be related with—perhaps through adherence to them, or perhaps through distancing mockery of them. Through their laughter practices, then, Batek people “actively prevent the emergence of religious and cosmological doctrine” (Kricheff and Lukas 2015, 140).

Relating *with* through laughter can therefore be ambiguous. On the one hand, sharing in laughter—like sharing in material possessions or food—can be seen as realizing a kind of “intrinsic good”: the pleasure of “mutual engagement” (Widlök 2016, 69; see also Bird-David 2005; Widlok 2004). When people laughed at Gubar during the storm, they emphasized the pleasure of laughing together. This shared loss of corporeal control creates pleasure, joy, and mutuality for the in-group, perhaps even more so when there is a shared understanding that this laughter is tabooed and wrong. On the other hand, laughter *at* can be diminishing, separating those laughing

from those being laughed at, as is also the case among the Warlpiri of central Australia (Musharbash 2008, 275).

When Batek people laugh at *gɔp*, they emphasize their ethical separation, not only by contrasting *ways* of laughing in ethical terms, but also by laughing *at* them or in situations in which *gɔp* may otherwise cause fear. This is also the case when people laugh at Gubar. Although on the one hand he may be related *with* through laughter (or through peoples' attempts to *not* laugh, as he wishes), at the same time his separateness is maintained as people laugh *at* him. Both *gɔp* and Gubar are thus drawn into a shared ethical realm by the very fact of people's attempts to distinguish them as separate, as is also the case of the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea (Bashkow 2006, 13–14). There is thus an ethical tension at the heart of how people negotiate the laughter taboos. While laughter creates togetherness, it can at the same time foreground separation and difference.

Laughter is therefore messy. In practice, it can have many consequences and can set up ethical quandaries. With ethics, it is therefore not solely an individual's actions and dispositions, repeated without conscious reflection, that create durable structures (Bourdieu 1993). Continually reenacting ethically significant everyday practices or acts is important for inculcating particular ethical orientations (Lambek 2010a, 7). If this were the limit, however, it would be "a relentlessly watertight explanation of a world in which it would be a miracle if anything were to ever

change, one also from which cruelty, pride, and jealousy are quite as absent as love” (Laidlaw 2014, 9; see also Farnell 2000). Given that laughter can be spontaneous and often uncontrollable—and yet that ways of laughing are nevertheless fundamental to Batek people’s conceptualizations of how to be “good”—then ethical life itself cannot be understood as watertight.

Ethical orientations will not be identical for everyone; they are not fixed, and yet they can be shared. As Naʔ Srimjam showed, when it comes to the ways they laugh, people can orient themselves toward a shared understanding of “the good,” tied in with their sense of “Batek-ness,” *at the same time as* they can act autonomously. What people define as “good,” how and why these ideals are shaped, *and* how people live up to them (Widlok 2004, 59), all contribute to the messiness of the ethical quandaries inherent in living an actual life (Keane 2016, 26; Mattingly 2014).

[h1]“The one with no eyelashes”: When things “just happen”

[ni]When people react to taboo laughter, they demonstrate the ethical tension at the heart of how they navigate their laughter taboos. For example, ʔEy Barəʔ, his relatives, and I would often revel in forbidden laughter. On one occasion, he sang a shaman’s song, inserting the phrase “the one with no eyelashes,” a humorous avoidance name for fish. His wife, his brother-in-law, and I all fell about laughing. “The one with no eyelashes,” he carried on, as we all wiped tears from our eyes. His wife, Naʔ Mtkət, told

him to watch out, or he would go mad since the song he was mocking was a shaman's song. He carried on regardless, and over the rest of the evening and the next few days, he kept chiming in with his rendition of the song at hilariously inopportune moments, causing us all to choke on our tea or burst out laughing while doing something else. As usual, protestations that we might go mad only made people stop joking for a few moments before chuckling again. Knowing we shouldn't be laughing made everything funnier, even though people chided that laughing so much and so loudly made us risk being *lawac*.

The next day, our breakfast was fish (or "the ones with no eyelashes"). A few hours later, I began to feel queasy, with cramping pains in my stomach. I told Na? Mtkot and ?Ey Barə?. Na? Mtkot was worried, but ?Ey Barə? just laughed—"Well, you shouldn't have been laughing at my song about the fish, then! You were ridiculing it! That's why you now have an upset stomach!" I protested that *I* had only laughed, but it was *he* who had been singing the song *and* laughing, as had everyone else who was present, so why was it only *me* who was now sick when he was fine?! He laughed and said, "It just is."

?Ey Barə? is often described as a very "good" person by the people he is close to, and in the same breath they often laugh and say, "He is always teasing" and "He's really naughty." On this occasion, his laughter and teasing meant he was violating taboos on at least three counts. First, he was

laughing loudly and a lot—and encouraging others to do so. This is *lawac* and risks causing a storm. Second, he was mocking a shaman's song, which risks the laugher going mad. Third, he was laughing at something that we were going to eat, which caused my upset stomach.

This illustrates that people's ethical values and their ability to live up to them may not always be matched equally (Laidlaw 2014, 169). The demands of the taboos were that ?Ey Barə? not laugh, and yet this coexisted with the inherent pleasure of sharing in laughter. The reason the joke evoked laughter was grounded in shared knowledge of the taboos and what would have been the "right" behavior, yet part of what made it funny was that the taboos were being broken, that ?Ey Barə? was acting autonomously in relation to them. Each of the people present knew ?Ey Barə? very well, however, and so rather than this being ground for accusations of "madness" or "badness," onlookers remarked that he was being taboo, but they also joined in the laughter.

The ethical quandaries set up by laughter are thus shown again: in laughing when they know it is "wrong," people assert autonomy in the face of what otherwise might become inflexible doctrine, just as when they mock the taboos themselves. At the same time, intimate ties between laughers are reinforced, grounded in the pleasure of laughing together. It was not required of ?Ey Barə? that he justify his actions, or reflect on what had happened, and there was no need to rationalize or reflect on why it was I

who got sick and not the others, when it could have been any one of us—"it just was." In moments when one laughs when one shouldn't, the demands of ethics are in conflict. On the one hand, loud laughter is prohibited and risks danger, sickness, or offense to other people or Gubar. On the other hand, the pleasure and intrinsic good of laughing together is tempting and pleasurable, and indeed to *not* laugh at ʔEy Barəʔ' s joke may have caused a rupture in itself, marking *him* out as having done something "bad" or as an "outsider," rather than as a relative who said something funny.

It is in these moments of conflict, when people test out the kinds of laughter they can get away with, that people foster a shared understanding of the "good" and "right" ways to laugh. Because this may be different in different instances, a final answer can never entirely be reached. One can behave in the "right" (*btʔεt*) way and enjoy the pleasure of laughing only moderately and at the right things, or one can succumb to temptation and revel in pleasurable, subversive, tabooed laughter, risking the dangerous consequences of madness, death, storms, or ostracism if one's actions become too extreme. At the same time, it is understood that sometimes things *just happen* and that people are fallible or do things for unknowable reasons, and that this is the only explanation that can, or should, be offered.

The idea that sometimes things "just are," or that people do things "on their own," somewhat contradicts the idea that being ethical inheres in self-reflection (Laidlaw 2014, 93; see also Faubion 2001). In that understanding

of ethics, when people are fallible, it is reflectiveness that is “absolutely necessary” in allowing subjects’ ethical beliefs to persist (and indeed to be strengthened), even when they fail to live up to their ideals (Laidlaw 2014, 168–69; cf. Scheele 2015, 35). Batek people’s responses to moments when people get things wrong show that reflecting on issues is not the only way people can formulate ideas of right and wrong, or good and bad.

This lack of evaluation or reflection doesn’t mean that people aren’t ethical or concerned with the “good” in their lives. In a manner akin to the “opacity of other minds” doctrine common among Melanesian groups (Robbins 2008; Schieffelin 2008; Stasch 2008), statements that sometimes things “just are” or that it is up to “them on their own,” reflect the idea that individual persons are autonomous—yet it is the closeness or togetherness of the people involved that allowed for this joke to take place at all, as is also the case for jokes among Western Apache people (Basso 1979, 68). A *lack* of ethical reflection may be what allows people to negotiate the fine balance of living autonomously yet together in the intimate familiar setting of a Batek camp. Such imaginings of what it means to be a person in relation to others are thus mutually implicated with people’s ethical orientations (Scheele 2015, 35).

[h1]A “Batek” ethical orientation

[ni]It is laughter's contradictions that allow Batek people to orientate themselves toward a shared understanding of what is "good" without detracting from individuals' autonomy. For them, ideas of right and wrong may shift in particular situations, sometimes being predefined as shared ethical imaginings and sometimes being taken into the hands of autonomous individuals while retaining their shape.

The taboos on laughter mark out *bt?et* behaviors, some details of which may be slightly idiosyncratic, but which are, in the main, deeply shared. Because the laughter taboos are obvious, and grounded in and pervading all kinds of daily activities, they are an egalitarian way of inculcating these views, because they do not rely on any one authority figure to teach or enforce them. Thus, in their "correct" enactment, the laughter taboos are a form of ethical pedagogy. But because laughter is contagious and pleasurable, people don't always adhere to the taboos.

Furthermore, when faced with a potentially fearful being, situation, or proscriptive set of rules, it is laughter itself that can allow Batek people ethical autonomy. The fact that the taboos exist at all shows that the things one is not supposed to laugh at *can* be laughed at, and indeed, in some cases it may be impossible to avoid laughing since the situation or the thing is just so funny or tempting to say—as when ?Ey Barə? made up the song about the fish. Yet in the immediacy of the moment of interacting with kin and friends, people don't always reflect on the ideal behavior as laid out by

the taboos. With laughter, sometimes this would be impossible because it can sometimes erupt uncontrollably. Ideals must sometimes be set aside, whether this is with reflection or a simple "it just is." Here, it is people's very closeness that facilitates their autonomy in relation to the ideals laid out by the taboos.

This reflects broader ethical orientations toward ways of relating that are commonly stated as "good" by Batek people. For example, positive judgments of *bt?et* are also specifically applied to the actions of people who don't withhold food and belongings from others, who cultivate friendships, exhibit the right amount of shyness, don't gossip unduly, don't easily become jealous, and always invite others to come to the forest with them on food-collecting or "play" trips.

Judgments of being *jbec* often center on ostentatious behavior, hoarding, violence, jealousy, or attempting to coerce others, though people may also not like someone for any other number of personal reasons. If taken to extreme levels, *jbec* behavior, especially violence, would warrant accusations of "madness." They thus risk gossip, ridicule, or even varying levels of ostracism in extreme cases, especially if violence is involved. On more than one occasion, when I asked why someone had said another person was "bad," it was whispered, "They are always hitting," "They are always jealous," "They don't share their food," or "They don't want to make friends."

Ethical discourses thus often focus on whether a person is considered to cooperate with others fully and willingly, or whether they attempt to assert authority—perhaps using violence, withholding possessions from others, or attempting to coerce them through jealousy. Such actions would each deny others their autonomy. Through their discourses on *btʔɛt* and *jbec* behavior, people therefore negotiate relationships carefully, ensuring egalitarian relations such that no person can systematically assert dominance or hierarchy over others, or coerce them by withholding goods or using violence (Endicott and Endicott 2008; cf. Lewis 2008, 2014; for discussion of this among other egalitarian groups, see Woodburn 1982, 2005). When it comes to ethics, it is not society that shapes the individual, nor is it solely individuals who control societies. Such a conception would risk imposing an implied “relation of domination,” one way or the other (Strathern 1990, 13; see also Helliwell 1996, 128–29), which would be at odds with Batek people’s broader egalitarian ideals.

This necessitates that people have a flexible, ad hoc understanding of what might explicitly be framed in terms of what is “good,” “right,” and “beautiful” (*btʔɛt*), and “bad,” “wrong,” and “ugly” (*jbec*), which foregrounds the immediacy of experiences, in which people may act on either individual or collective concerns.¹⁰ Sometimes, things “just are”; people make mistakes and can’t help themselves. Learning to laugh thus helps people pin down the very fact that their ethical orientations can never be pinned down,

that they are just that, *orientations* (on unresolvably contradictory moral messages among Bedouin people, see Abu-Lughod 2016, 252–55). In deciding whether to laugh or mock, to hold their laughter in even when something is funny, or to burst out laughing regardless of whether it's appropriate, people shape their broader ethical orientations and their ability to work "separately together" (Bird-David 2017 129), and to cooperate autonomously (Endicott 2011; Endicott and Endicott 2008).

Learning to understand that sometimes one shouldn't laugh, but that one can't control what is happening and nor can others, is as essential in shaping a "Batek" sense of the good as actually adhering to the taboos. Indeed, even when Batek people laugh when they aren't supposed to, and they realize and articulate that what is happening is subversive (for example, through exclamations of "lawac!"), this is a contrast to the ignorant laughter of those *gɔp* who laugh without knowing or caring.

Being unable to stop another from doing what they want to do thus becomes a part of the ethical orientation that comes to be seen as "Batek." People's succumbing to taboo laughter and their reactions to it exemplify this, and indeed shape the ethical skill of "Batekness" itself. It is this very flexibility that allows people to foster their ambiguous yet clearly demarked relationship with *gɔp*. In managing the conflicting demands and effects of laughter, people's commitment to a "Batek" ethical orientation is strengthened.

Not just through conscious reflection but also through the pleasure of laughter, anchored in the physical body, do Batek people learn not only how to be “right” but also how to be “wrong,” and to acknowledge the “wrongness” of others. Mistakes don’t need to be justified or reflected on every time, but this doesn’t mean that people don’t consider themselves ethical. Sometimes, things “just are.” It is thus the “problematic elements” of a culture that keep it “active, alive in the awareness of its carriers and flexible, responsive to change” (Briggs 1998, 209). Batek people may also decide to discuss and reflect upon ethical matters, and do so with great seriousness, but being ethical can also arise from acknowledging that sometimes in problematic moments, choosing a lack of reflection can itself be an ethical act.

Taking seriously the moments when people get things wrong therefore shows that to understand ethics in any context, one should not start from either the view that ethics comprise obligations set out by broader cultural systems or from the view that they are defined by autonomous individuals. Rather, it may be that they are formed by finding an ad hoc balance between the two. Attention to the moments when people get things wrong can indicate how such a balance may occur; as in any ethical orientation, there may be constant shifts among acting in what is predefined as “right,” reflecting on this, or, unaccountably, and uncontrollably, being “wrong.” The

ways people attempt “to create the good in their lives” (Robbins 2013, 457) are thus mutually implicated with broader ideas of person and society.

Laughter is an ambiguous and multifaceted phenomenon that is uncontrollable and contagious. Given laughter’s potential as a site for getting things wrong, the ways people laugh might, in other contexts too, reflect not only what people think of as right and wrong (what or who do they laugh at), but also how they formulate these ideas in relation to concepts of what it means to be a person in relation to others.

[h1]Notes

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1. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

2. The orthography I use is based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, but it adheres to the orthographic standards commonly used in describing Aslian languages (Kruspe, Burenhult, and Wnuk 2015).

Translations of Batek terms are my own.

3. I conducted 18 months of fieldwork. This took place from February 2014 to July 2015, with two additional follow-up visits of four to six weeks each in subsequent years. The field site was in and close to Taman Negara in Pahang. I conducted the fieldwork in Batek.

4. The Batek people referred to here speak Batek Deq (abbreviated to Batek in this article) (Kruspe, Burenhult, and Wnuk 2015).

5. As is also the case for the presence of “whitemen” among the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea (Bashkow 2006).

6. Similar “ambiguity” is important in Batek cultural resilience (Lye 2013, 420), and it also applies to people’s relationship with the forest itself (Lye 2005, 50).

7. See Kricheff and Lukas 2015 for discussion of the relationship between practice, identity, and egalitarianism among the Maniq, another Northern Aslian-speaking group.

8. See also Keane 2016, 18–19; Laidlaw 2014, 110–19; Lambek 2010b, 42.

9. As is the case for Batek environmental knowledge more broadly (Lye 2003; 2005, 161).

10. Similarly, among the Mbendjele, another egalitarian hunter-gatherer group, “flux” is essential in the “process of continual renegotiation” that is egalitarianism (Finnegan 2017, 134).

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